TRANSCRIPT—LAVONIA WHITSON

Interviewee: Lavonia Whitson

Interviewer: Tealey Ellis and Judith Robertson

Interview Date: March 4, 2019

Location: 1 Taylor Road, Fairview Public Library

Length: 1 digital recording; 00:28:38

Transcriber: Rev.com

Transcription Date: November 22, 2022

Abstract: Lavonia Whitson recalls her experience moving to Fairview in the early 1970s, in particular a significant flood in 1973.

Tealey Ellis: My name Tealey Ellis and I am a volunteer with the Fairview North Carolina Library Oral History Project. Today, March 4th, 2019, I am interviewing Lavonia Whitson at the Fairview Library. Thank you, Miss Whitson for this interview.

Judith Robertson: This is Judith Robertson recording the oral history of Lavonia Whitson at the Fairview Library at 10:30 on March the 4th, 2019. The condition of use form for sound and video recordings has been signed by the interviewee.

TE: Prior to the recording starting, you had indicated, Lavonia, that you were not from Fairview and that you had moved here at some time. So maybe that's where we could start with when you moved here and maybe why you came to Fairview.

Lavonia Whitson: Okay. We moved to Fairview in May of 1973 and we were from the Asheville area and was looking to go to country. We thought we wanted country because

we'd always lived basically in town so we wanted to go country. I woke the next morning to the sound of cowbells, that was so unusual because in town you don't hear cowbells.

And so, the next morning we woke up to the sound of cowbells and that's just always made an impression on me because that's something you don't hear today. And at that time, it was unusual for me.

TE: Sure.

LW: To wake to sound of cowbells. I woke many mornings to the sound of Rupert Miller calling, "Soo cow, soo cow." He would get out early of the morning and he would call his cows in to milk and so I woke many mornings to that. And this generation gets their milk out of a bottle, so they have no idea what that was. But Rupert would get out and he lived across from us and so many, many mornings, we awoke to the sound of Rupert getting out and saying "Soo cow, soo cow." He's calling his cow in.

JR: Okay, you want to continue.

TE: If it pertains to why you moved here.

LW: Well, the next, it was the flood of 1973. It occurred one week.

TE: Let's get to that a little bit later.

LW: Little later, okay.

JR: Because we'll be very interested in hearing about that.

LW: Okay.

TE: Okay. When you moved here, what area of Fairview, did you move to?

LW: Old Fort Road.

TE: On Old Fort Road.

LW: Yes.

TE: And you still have that property there today?

LW: Still have that property, still live there today.

TE: Okay. And from your opening comment there, you were not disappointed at having moved to Fairview?

LW: No.

TE: So very pleased-

LW: No, not at all. Very pleased.

TE: ... overall. And I'm assuming that you still are today?

LW: Very pleased.

TE: From the '73 to now, what kind of changes have you seen in Fairview?

LW: Well, I've seen 74, that went from a two-lane road to what it is today. Let's see what other kind of changes that I've seen.

JR: What was the sense of community like when you moved to this area?

LW: Okay, I have that down, I don't know if I should insert it here or not. But my daughter, when we moved here was 10 years old. There was a country store up the road on up Old Fort Road and it was Sheet's Grocery. So, my daughter and her dog walked to the store every day, she went to get candy and ice cream and stuff like that. There was no sense that she was unsafe, it was just a good community and we just felt like it was safe. There wasn't a lot of traffic. She and the dos sometimes walked to the store and back without seeing a car or anything like that. And just had that sense of being safe and protected and-

TE: Traffic wise, it's certainly different today, isn't it?

LW: It is very different today.

TE: And very fast traffic.

LW: Very fast traffic going Old Fort Road, yes.

TE: How would you describe Fairview today in terms of a child maybe going out to walk to a store?

LW: Oh, no. There would be no way that I could let a child walk from my house to a store today, no. The traffic is just, it's not bumper to bumper, but it's fast and there's a lot of it. And so, it's changed dramatically from the time that she could walk to the store at 10, 11 years old to what it is today.

TE: In '73, in addition to feeling that your child was safe in doing what you described. What was the sense of welcoming or neighbors? Did you feel welcome?

LW: Felt welcome the day that we moved in, Mrs. Peak was my neighbor across the road. She came over and she said, "I have cooked." They called it dinner at that time. It wasn't lunch, it was dinner. She said, "I have cooked dinner for you folks." She introduced herself to us and she said, "I have dinner ready, you're to come across the road and eat dinner with us." And so, very welcoming. On Sunday, we went to church in Fairview Baptist Church, very welcoming, very open arms. We were embraced by the community. It was just a sense of you belonging from the start.

TE: On a scale of one to 10, with 10 being high and positive, I would assume that that would be your sense of welcoming and it was a 10.

LW: 10.

TE: A perfect 10. What do you think about today? In terms of if there are any new people from out of Fairview or out state, out of town moving in. What do you think?

LW: I don't think it would be as welcoming today. I have neighbors that, I guess you could say I basically not met. And on my part that's not because I didn't try but that's because they didn't want to be bothered in that sense.

TE: Got you.

LW: That have moved in that just can remember one that I just... You know, you go and you're just standing there, you're not invited in and you just say, "Wanted to welcome you." And it's not too receptive.

TE: Right. You said your daughter was 10.

LW: She was 10 when we moved here on Monday, on Saturday she turned 11.

TE: Oh, 11. How would you describe her experiences from a parent's point of view at the Fairview School?

LW: (phone interrupts) I'm in my interview.

Speaker 4: Oh, okay.

TE: From a parent's point of view of her experiences in Fairview community at the school and friends.

LW: It was positive. She just started school, didn't know anybody and so she was welcomed by the teachers and the students. And so, she...

TE: What did you think about the school, Fairview Elementary School? Do you remember maybe some particular things that you liked about it? Because she had gone to school in Asheville?

LW: Yes.

TE: Before coming here.

LW: No, I can't really think of anything that stands out. I just remember that I guess it was smaller and I just remember that I was happy with the school.

TE: You felt welcome.

LW: Yes, I felt welcome.

TE: And that's key for sure. When you bought the property that you're still living on today, did you do any farming?

LW: We did.

TE: Any crops?

LW: Yes, we raised a garden. We raised what we called back then, a corn patch. So yes, we did do gardening.

TE: Do you have any livestock?

LW: We did. We bought our daughter a pony. She had a pony and so that was different that-

TE: Any fresh eggs. Did you have chickens?

LW: We didn't have chickens until later on. Not when we first moved, no.

TE: Okay. But later you did. I think we've probably covered most of it in and maybe one of your opening statements about the best aspects of living in Fairview and I think you did a really good job of describing that. What do you think are the best aspects of today of living in Fairview? Memories are part of it, I know.

LW: Yeah.

TE: When you've lived in a place for a while. And I guess maybe if I clarified a little more in terms of, if you knew someone well who was going to move to Fairview, what would you tell them?

LW: Well, I would say that we still have that sense of living in the country, even though it's not country as it was in 1973. But we still have that feeling of being in the country that you can still have a little bit of land and you're not right in on top of your neighbor. I

would say that is still a positive. I would say another positive is being close to Asheville, that you're close to town.

TE: Did you lock your doors when you first moved here?

LW: No, we didn't lock the doors. No.

TE: Did it change? Do you lock your doors?

LW: Yes. Oh yes.

TE: Roughly, when do you think that changed?

LW: When do I think that changed? Let's see. We moved here in 1973, probably in the latter '80s. I'm just guessing on that, probably the latter '80s.

TE: What brought that on?

LW: Just hearing about crime in the community that we haven't ever necessarily experienced anything. But just hearing it happened over here, it happened over there. And just hearing that crime was and so you felt like that.

TE: Became aware of.

LW: Became aware.

TE: Of things that were going on.

LW: Of things that were going on in the community.

TE: And that's certainly a good reason.

JR: Could I ask a couple of questions.

TE: Sure, jump right in.

JR: This is kind of like going back a little bit, if you don't mind. I see that you were born in Madison County?

LW: Yes.

JR: Is that where you were raised?

LW: Yes.

JR: Were you raised on a farm?

LW: Yes.

JR: And your parents were farmers?

LW: My parents were farmers. We raised tobacco and all that, yes.

JR: Okay, so, you really were a country girl.

LW: Yes.

JR: So,were you retired when you moved to Fairview?

LW: Oh no. We were... Let's see, '73. That would've been 44, 4, 64, I was 29 years old.

JR: Oh, so you had moved from Madison County to Asheville?

LW: Yes.

JR: And I assume you and your husband both were working?

LW: Yes.

JR: In Asheville. Where did y'all work?

LW: He worked at Ball Corporation, he retired from there. Only job he ever had.

JR: The glass-

LW: Yes.

JR: ... jar factory.

LW: Yes. And I worked at Sears.

JR: At Sears, wow. And did you continue working there after you moved to Fairview?

LW: Yes.

JR: And you retired from both of those places?

LW: No, I didn't retire from Sears.

JR: Okay.

TE: When you moved to Fairview in '73, do you have memories of what ethnicities were here in Fairview? Was everyone white? Were there people of different color? What was it like in '73 for that?

LW: You didn't see many colors, I remember that. And I think I'm telling this correctly that my daughter had one Black student in her class but no, it didn't. Ethnics didn't come in until later on, it was primarily white. But I do remember that she did have one Black student in her class but that's all I can remember when we first came to Fairview.

TE: Let me ask you at this point so that we don't get totally off track, you have some items there that you want to share with us. So, would you like to share some of those now and we'll see how they tie in with this?

LW: Okay. The flood of 1973, I don't know if anybody has mentioned that.

JR: Yes. And I'm dying of curiosity and I've been trying to research a little bit and finding it difficult to get information.

LW: I went online to make sure just that I had the dates and all correct. Couldn't find anything about it.

JR: Did you get May 31st? It was Memorial Day weekend, 1973.

LW: No.

JR: That's what I've come up with is May 31st.

LW: Well, I've got dates. I did go on Google and got dates for these. I thought I had it correct and when I went on Google and I did have that correct. But the flood of 1973 came one week after we moved to Fairview. We moved in on a Monday and on Sunday night the flood comes. So, it came one week later after we moved and should I give names here or just call it my neighbor or what?

TE: As long as it's positive and just in identifying things, I don't see a problem with giving a person's name because most of the other people we've interviewed certainly do that in talking about experiences.

LW: Okay. I wasn't sure about that and I didn't call to verify it would be okay to do it. But my neighbor, Raymond Pressley, waded water to his neck trying to rescue his hunting dogs. He had hunting dogs. And s,o the flood came so quickly and all that. He waded water to his neck trying to rescue those dogs.

JR: Was that water in Cane Creek?

LW: Yes.

JR: So, Cane Creek got way out of its banks.

LW: Cane Creek got way out. That's Cane Creek that goes down by my house and so it got way out of banks.

JR: And it came up into Mr. Miller's pasture, I guess.

LW: Yes. And so, Raymond waded water to his neck trying to rescue his hunting dogs. Raymond and Betty's bridge that was going across Cane Creek, flooded out. So, they're on the side of the mountain there and there's no access into their house because they lost their bridge there.

During the night, we heard this terrible, terrible noise. We could tell, it sounded like something hitting but we couldn't identify it and of course the lightning and the rain and all. Oh, it was just incredible, but we kept hearing this noise. So the next day we learned that Raymond's big rock truck, he's a rock mason, and his big rock truck that he has had washed away in the flood.

JR: Oh, my goodness.

LW: And so, we determined that it was that truck hitting the rocks and the trees as it went downstream, was the noise that we were hearing.

JR: My Lord.

LW: It was incredible. My neighbor, Archie Peak, which lives or did live directly across from me, his fence washed away. And Mr. Peak was probably in his 70s at that time and was a diabetic. So, he was so concerned that his cows was going to escape the pasture because there was no fence. And my husband had that day off because it was Memorial Day weekend and he had the day off so he helped Mr. Peak's son. Mr. Peak wasn't physically able to build a fence, so my husband helped his son build the fence, restore the fence so that they could keep the cattle back in the pasture.

JR: How nice.

TE: Did you lose electrical power during that time? Because you mentioned the heavy rain and thunder and lightning and so forth.

LW: I don't remember losing power. We didn't even lose power during the blizzard of 1993. We very seldom lose power.

TE: Fortunate.

LW: Yes, very, very fortunate so we very seldom ever lose power. So, I don't remember losing power during the flood. I just remember that it was incredible. I do remember and I don't know if you would want this or not, but we had a friend that lived at Candler. And he had a trailer park at that time and his entire trailer park was destroyed and he said that he lost a $100,000 without insurance and that was 1973. Now, he wouldn't get a trailer

park today for a $100,000. But he lost his entire trailer park, mobile home park in 1973 and he lost a $100,000 at that time.

TE: Do you recall how long it took for the water to recede in this flood in '73?

LW: I don't recall on how long it took it to recede or anything. I think we were just in such a state of shock that we had just moved in, was trying to get everything straightened out and here this comes on top of us. And I really don't remember how long it took for the water to recede.

TE: Just curious.

JR: Did many people lose livestock?

LW: I don't remember many people losing livestock, but I had a distant cousin that lost her life in it. She lived over on Mills Gap Road and I think it was her and the two children that died in that same flood.

JR: Oh, my goodness. How tragic. Well then this is much more widespread than just Fairview. This was all of Western North Carolina?

LW: Well, I don't know if all Western North Carolina, but she lived on Mills Gap Road.

JR: Buncombe County.

LW: Yes. And it was just a very small stream that went by her house. She lived in a trailer park and they said what happened, that there was some kind of debris or something and it stood up this way.

JR: Made a dam.

LW: And the water just dammed up against that. And she and her children were trying to get out and she lost her life.

JR: Wow, how tragic.

TE: It is.

JR: Yeah.

TE: That is tragic.

JR: All right.

TE: Other items you wanted to share?

LW: No, the only other item was about my daughter and what a safe environment it was for her and that that was all of-

TE: Okay.

LW: ... the other that I had down.

TE: And I'm keeping an eye on the time because I know you have another appointment and that you have to be somewhere. If we could take a couple minutes, when you moved here in 1973 to Fairview, was it a shock as to stores not available?

LW: I don't think it was a shock because I drove back in to town, see.

TE: Okay.

LW: So, I don't think that I found that as a shock. And then we had the little grocery store right up above, a Sheets grocery store that my daughter could walk to and so she could get her candy and she could get her a popsicle and stuff like that.

TE: Right.

LW: So, I don't remember feeling a loss as to the stores.

TE: Well as you said, you were back in Asheville every day.

LW: I was back in there every day.

TE: So, you could do shopping.

LW: Yes.

JR: On the old two-lane Road.

LW: Yes, on the old two-lane Road.

TE: Judith, it's 11:00 o'clock now and I don't want it cut it short if you have some other things you want to share. I think you've given us some very helpful, good information. And this information about the flood in 1973, that it was very, very good to have. Do you have some more questions?

JR: Well, I would like to ask, what did you do for fun?

LW: What did we do for fun? My husband had always been an outdoorsman, was always an outdoorsman. So, he had what was called back in those days, trail bikes. So, we would pack up, say on a weekend, and we would head over to Davidson River and we would

camp out and ride trail bikes and we had other families that met us there and stuff like that.

JR: That was good.

TE: That was good fun.

JR: Really good stuff.

LW: Yeah. And I remember one time in particular, we had gone, we were staying longer than just say, the weekend. And we'd had a couple of days of rain and got up that morning, oh, the sun was just beautiful. So, I said, "I'm going to hang our cover out. I'm going to hang it out. It can air out today, it can sun dry and all that." And so he said, "Okay." And he told the area that we was going to ride into that day. So I said, "Okay." So I hang all the cover and all that out in the sun and I'm thinking, "Oh, we're going to come in. It's going to be all this."

So, we get on the trail back and he has my daughter sitting in front of him and I'm on the back. So, we head into this area that was really remote and we get there and I don't remember what we were doing there. I mean as far as entertainment, if we were seeing something special or whatever. But anyway, we get there and all of a sudden, I look back toward camp and I see this dark looking cloud. So needless to say, it came a downpour. We came back and we just had to pack up and come in because all of our cover was wet and all that. So, we just had to pack it.

JR: Had to give it up.

LW: Yeah. Had to give it up.

TE: Does your daughter live in Fairview?

LW: She does, yes.

TE: Okay.

JR: And has she continued with the outdoor activities?

LW: No.

JR: She doesn't like it.

TE: She had enough of it. And does she have children?

LW: She does. And we built a house on the property. We rented the house that was on it. We never ever lived in it, we rented it the whole time. We built a house on the property and when she got married, she found property down on Cane Creek and she built on Cane Creek, but she didn't feel like he was big enough. It was a two-bedroom house they built and she didn't feel like he was big enough.

So, my husband was coming up, facing retirement and he said, "Well, we need to downsize." So, what happened? She bought our house that was larger. We went, moved on down the property and we built a smaller house on the property. So, she lives on the property today, I live on the property today.

TE: Okay.

JR: Oh, that's wonderful.

TE: And how old is your grandchildren?

LW: I have one that she just turned 21 and the other one will turn 26 in May. She's got about two and a half months till she gets her BSN in nursing.

TE: And so, they went to Fairview Elementary School?

LW: No.

TE: No.

LW: They didn't. Let's see, Brynn, she went to third grade and she has dyslexia. So, they told her in third grade that they could no longer help her and that they needed to seek other help for her. So, they put her in a Christian school, private school. So, she went there until 10th grade. And by that time, the resources in public school had changed. And so, she was able to get help, went to Reynolds, graduated with honors.

TE: Wonderful.

LW: And so now she's got two and a half months left until she gets her BSN.

JR: Fantastic. What a great story.

TE: That is a wonderful story.

JR: Yeah.

TE: I'm glad you shared that with us.

LW: And then the other one, she went to Fairview Kindergarten. She went there, kindergarten was all she went and it was just so hard but my daughter kind of get the other one to this school.

TE: Sure.

LW: And this one here, and she said, "I'm just going to pull Bailey out when she gets through kindergarten and put them both in the same school."

TE: That's understandable. That's certainly understandable. Well, it's five after 11:00 and I know you have to be somewhere. I just wanted to mention again that if you have any photographs of, as Judith had described earlier, buildings, not necessarily family photos, but buildings that show what Fairview was in '73 and so forth and so on. Documents of any kind that would be of interest. Just call, events-

JR: Events, things that you went to here.

LW: Okay.

TE: And so just call the library and tell them that you were interviewed. And Jamie McDowell is the library manager, J-A-I-M-E McDowell.

LW: Events, you said Events.

TE: Events.

JR: And pictures.

TE: Pictures, if you had any flood pictures or natural things that have happened, what roads looked like. If you have any pictures of all '74, things of that nature. Just call the library and tell them that you were interviewed and you have some things you'd like to have scanned and they'll make the arrangement for you.

LW: I was thinking that if I could come up with a picture of my daughter and her dog walking that that would be nice.

TE: That would be.

LW: Because I just saw on the-

JR: That's the type of thing we'd really love to see.

LW: ... internet this morning, little 11-year-old was found dead that she'd gone missing and was found dead. And I thought, now I really need to see if I've got any pictures of Donna and her dog in the store.

JR: And you would have the rough date on it and everything. And so that would be very nice. So again, it's not a rush rush but just take your time if you see if you find some of those pictures.

LW: Well, if you need to continue, I'll call and see if-

JR: And if you're in doubt about something, bring it because Jaime will sort through and decide.

LW: You say that is Jamie.

JR: J-A-I-M-E.

TE: McDowell.

LW: McDowell.

TE: And she's here most of the time. And if not, just leave a message for her.

LW: Jennifer was the one that suggested that I do this.

JR: Oh, good.

TE: Okay. So, you'd call her too anytime. So, thank you so much, Lavonia, for sharing this information with us today.

LW: Well, thank you. And I wish I could have been more helpful in-

TE: No, you were very helpful.

JR: Oh, no, this is wonderful.

TE: Everyone-

JR: You can turn it off.

TE: Everyone that we've interviewed--.

END OF INTERVIEW.